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SUPERVISING INDEPENDENT HOMEWORK OF BOARDING SCHOOL STUDENTS

- USSR -

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FOREWORD

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[Following is a translation of an article by N. Myaskovskaya in the Russian-language periodical Narodnoye Obrazovaniye (Public Education) No. 12, Moscow, December 1957, pages 73-76.)

The preparation of homework by boarding school students, from the beginning, presented considerable difficulty both for the children and for the teachers and tutors. Many children did not have proper independent work habits and there were serious gaps in their knowledge of the programs from preceding years of study. Some pupils did not even know how to sit correctly and how to hold a fountain pen. As a result, students were unable to do their homework within the assigned time, and sometimes continued to prepare their lessons after supper.

The pedagogical staffs of boarding schools knew well that the progress of students depends to a considerable extent on independent work. But many organizational and methodological difficulties arose. Who must supervise the preparation of lessons, where should these studies be conducted, how should the work of groups be organized so that children do not disturb each other, and should those who complete their homework first be allowed to leave? These and similar questions could be solved only in practice.

At home, the children prepared their lessons, as a rule, themselves, having their own corner or part of a table. Usually, people tried not to bother them with noise and conversations, helped them, and sometimes even actually did their work for them. Under the new system, many had to give up old habits and develop new ones.

The boarding schools spent some time arguing about who should supervise the preparation of homework -- the teacher or the tutor.

At present, the overwhelming majority of boarding school workers believe that the tutor should supervise the performance of homework. Indeed, in the preparation of homework, attention should be mainly directed to independent work on the part of students, and help on the part of the tutor should be limited mainly to maintaining order in the classroom where the children are studying and in offering some advice or leading questions which may be of help in difficult cases. The aid given by tutors should not be limited to coaching, but should include the organization of independent work by students.

It took a long time for people in boarding schools to reach this conclusion, and it also took a long time to solve many other problems.

At present, a system for supervising the conduct of homework is being developed. Let's examine the experience gained at several boarding schools, and specifically, at the Moscow Boarding School No. 13.

V. G. Petrunina, a fourth grade teacher at this school, immediately set herself the task, together with tutors, of attempting to eliminate gaps in students' knowledge, especially in the Russian language and arithmetic. She systematically studied shortcomings in the knowledge of each student, carefully prepared for lessons, and conducted studies in an interesting and fascinating manner.

A skilful combination of classwork and homework, and a carefully planned system for conducting homework, helped V. G. Petrunina to achieve the elimination of poor students' progress in her class. Each time, the teacher knew what results the students must be able to achieve in performing their current assignment, what information they should retain, what skills must be acquired and habits developed, and what gaps must be eliminated, etc.

Tutors working in close contact with this teacher provide substantial help in all matters.

Tutors attend her lessons, study the program of the fourth grade, and constantly talk with the teacher.

At the beginning of the academic year, the tutors were given a concrete plan for supervising the independent homework of students; and in a special notebook, the teacher noted the home work assignment and recorded the name of the pupil and what subject required special attention and review.

Thus, the class tutors are not only familiar with the academic program and the work system used by the teacher, as well as with the specific assignment for a given day, but also know which pupil should be given special attention on that day and what subject should be checked.

It is necessary to point out that the pedagogical staff of the class (the teacher and two tutors) have set themselves the task of developing specific skills and habits in the entire class and in individual students.

Here is an example. Student Boris M. was not accustomed to work systematically and attentively and was lazy in studying his lessons. The tutors set themselves the task of teaching this pupil to perform his homework in an accurate and conscientious manner. Every day, the tutors checked whether the youngster had prepared his lessons, and the teacher questioned him in class. In addition, Boris was given the assignment to check the homework given to another student. This gave him a sense of responsibility and made him study better.

During the second quarter, Boris completed his studies with "straight five [A]" grades. At present, he has acquired a solid knowledge, and not only does his homework well himself, but also helps his comrades. Tutors no longer check the progress of his work.

Pedagogical staffs in boarding schools are frequently faced with the following question: What is the role of tutors during the preparation of homework by students?

This problem is solved in different ways at various boarding schools. For example, it happens that in one boarding school, the fourth grade tutor organizes and directs the independent work of students, while the third grade tutor believes that students should work independently. The first tutor considers the preparation of homework as one of his most important duties, while the second one regards it as relatively free time.

For example, in some schools, during the hours assigned for homework, preparation, seventh grade students supervise the independent work of lower grade students under their tutelage, and prepare their own lessons at the same time.

Sometimes students prepare their lessons without any organization whatsoever: they do what they wish and talk loudly.

Such an unorganized preparation of homework not only is of no benefit to the students, but is harmful, as it inculcates a careless attitude towards independent work.

Teachers must devote particular attention to the organization of homework among lower-grade students, since younger pupils do not yet possess firm habits for doing mental work. These young students must be taught both by the teacher during lesson hours and by the tutor during the time allocated for homework. The necessity of teaching young students how to learn has been frequently pointed out by K. D. Ushinskiy, who in particular, has recommended the practice of giving small assignments, which have previously been carried out on the blackboard in the presence and under the guidance of the teacher.

The pedagogical staff of the Moscow Boarding School No. 10 has approved the work done by A. I. Prineva, a first grade tutor, involving the supervision of independent homework by students.

Under the system used by this tutor, the entire class prepares its lessons in an organized manner, and not simply under her observation, but under her direct supervision. First, all students perform their writing homework, remembering the way in which it is to be done. A specific example is studied on the blackboard. Those who complete the exercise wait for the rest. The name of the pupil who has best fulfilled the assignment is noted. Then, the pupils do their arithmetic homework. Some figures are written on the board. Having completed this work, the children, under the teacher's guidance, perform oral calculations with the use of visual aids. After a break, reading assignments are done in an organized manner, with pupils reading individually and then all reading together. Words are made up with the aid of a word stock.

Naturally, such work is possible only if the teacher is familiar with school programs and teaching methods.

In some boarding schools (Moscow School No. 15, for example), homework is done only during the lesson period.

Some people believe that homework should be supervised only in the first two or three grades. However, even in the fourth grade, students have by no means acquired independent work habits. In all cases, the supervision of homework is advisable until the time when teachers are sure that the children are capable of doing independent work.

When the students know how to prepare their homework and when they acquire firm habits of independent work, they will study with interest and attention and without wasting time.

In the fifth grade of Boarding School No. 13, in Moscow, independent preparation of homework starts at the sound of a bell.

Each student begins to do his assigned work on the subject which is most convenient for him. At first, however, all students learn the assigned rules and only afterwards proceed to do the exercises. They study with concentration and are not distracted by outside matters.

Tutor T. Lin'kova attentively supervises each student. There is a rule in the class: desk neighbors are obligated to tell each other what they have learned. When a student finishes his written assignment, he gets up silently and lays his notebook on the tutor's desk. The tutor does not check all the notebooks thoroughly, but only glances through them. Only the work of those students is checked, which in the opinion of the tutor require special attention. If the assignment is poorly done, the student must do it over again.

Students who have prepared all their lessons are allowed to do whatever they wish, as long as they do not disturb their schoolmates.

"Tamara Sergeevna! May Belov sit with me?"

"Why?"

"He is interested in my book."

Tamara Sergeevna allows the schoolmates to sit together. One girl takes out her needlework and gets busy with her embroidery.

The tutor again reminds the class: "Has everyone compared their arithmetic problems?" The time, set aside for preparation, is coming to an end. Each pupil who is completing his work makes all the necessary preparations for the first lesson of the following day. Those students who have completed their assignment can leave the classroom.

By 6 o'clock, the lessons assigned for the following day have been prepared by all students.

As can be seen from the above description, this particular class exhibits a conscientious attitude toward independent work during homework assignments, as well as an active attention, diligence and work discipline on the part of students.

The picture was different at the beginning of the school year. Many gaps in the students knowledge and a lack of logical thinking habits were observed. Extensive and laborious work had to be performed

by the tutors. Above all, they devoted much attention to explanations. The students were trained to study under new conditions, namely as members of a group, and they were taught persistently and systematically how to prepare their lessons. Now, for example, it is considered inadmissible for any student to ask his tutor or schoolmates what his homework assignment is. The tutor will immediately ask him: "What right do you have not to know this? You were in class?" Previously, it happened that homework was written on the blackboard during individual study hours, or that the tutor asked one of the pupils what his assignment on a given subject was for the following day; afterwards, the class was asked whether the nature of the assignment was clear to all.

At the beginning of the year, tutors frequently told the students not only how to prepare their lessons independently, but also showed them how to do it. Thus, Tamara Sergeyevna, for example, opened her history textbook under the paragraph assigned for homework, and studied its contents with great detail in her class, extracting the main ideas, breaking up the paragraph into parts, and formulating a plan of exposition; i.e., she showed her students how to study with a textbook.

A rather long time was spent in helping students acquire habits involving a correct approach to the solution of arithmetic problems. One of the students read the conditions of the problem aloud. The nature of subject matter already known was established, as well as what had to be learned. It was frequently necessary to draw explanatory sketches on the board.

It happened sometimes that teachers came to supervise the preparation of homework.

At first, tutors checked the homework done by each student. If the assignment was poorly done, he had to do it over again, sometimes several times. Gradually, the students got accustomed to perform their assignments with a sense of responsibility, and did their homework conscientiously and in a short period of time. It was no longer necessary to check the homework assignments given to each student.

At first, this fact even surprised the children.

"Did I do the exercise correctly?"

"I do not know, I did not check it."

"If it's OK with you, let me check it again."

Pupils began to exhibit a sense of responsibility for the quality of their homework.

At present, the tutor underlines the students' mistakes with a red pencil in the notebooks which he looks over. In this way, the teacher sees that a student corrected a mistake, not by himself, but only after it was pointed out to him by the tutor.

The mutual tutoring (coaching) of students was also of great significance, whereby pupils falling behind were tutored (coached) not only by top-grade students, but also by average grade students. If a student prepared his assignment poorly, the student who checked his work was also blamed. The students regard this relationship as a great responsibility and exercise strict control over their wards.

The rule already mentioned above (namely the oral review of lessons with desk neighbors) has greatly helped to develop the recitation abilities of students. Now they can express their thoughts rather freely.

The frame of mind of the entire staff and its attitude toward their teaching obligations is important in increasing the rate of students' progress. Class meetings, which are held regularly on Saturdays, play a vital role; at these meetings, results of the weekly students' progress are summed up and the best teams are selected. A student who has received a "2" must explain how he plans to make up for this poor showing in his studies, and must explain to the class how he intends to study other subjects in the future.

Those students who have done good work are also acknowledged at the meeting.

Such meetings increase the responsibility of students. Undoubtedly, as time goes on, when the children have developed firm habits for independent and systematic mental work, the constant presence of a teacher or tutor in supervising homework will no longer be necessary. Such a system has been practiced for a long time at the Suvorov military schools.

Some students have come into boarding schools (especially, it seems, in the intermediate and senior classes), who, although possessing definite habits for independent work, are not yet accustomed to doing their homework in a systematic and regular manner. Strict supervision of such senior class students is necessary.

The preparation of homework is permissible not only in the classroom, but also in other quarters of the boarding school; however, this should be allowed only if the children have a sense of responsibility toward independent work and do not need constant supervision by tutors.

In some boarding schools, the time allotted to homework is frequently changed, and excursions or some other activities are organized during the time usually assigned for independent work. This creates in the students the impression that the preparation of lessons is a matter of minor importance.

It would be incorrect to think that conscientious work performed only by tutors alone can solve all problems. Teachers are still primarily responsible for the quality, scope, and stability of the students' knowledge both in boarding and public schools. The progress of instruction is determined by the quality of his teaching ability. Therefore, it is during lessons that children should be taught the importance of independent work.

However, some teachers in boarding schools are sometimes of the opinion that they can "save time" during lessons by using the time allocated for independent work. One arithmetic teacher, a fifth grade tutor, after assigning his students to work at home on a new type of problem, failed to discuss in class the manner in which such problems were to be solved. After we asked him why this was done, he explained

that he often did this, since he also worked as a tutor and was present in class during the period of independent work, at which time he could assign work to the students and explain to them how this work should be done.

Another female teacher decided to eliminate such an important part of the lesson as the question period, since she felt that the tutor, while supervising and checking the preparation of lessons, knew the names of those students who had assimilated the material and the extent to which they had assimilated it.

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